

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

01 February 2010

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Welch, E. (2007) 'Coming to terms with the future : the experience of modernity in Annie Ernaux's 'Journal du dehors'.', French cultural studies, 18 (1). pp. 125-136.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0957155807073319>

Publisher's copyright statement:

The final definitive version of this article has been published in the Journal French cultural studies 18 (1) 2007
Copyright © SAGE Publications by SAGE Publications Ltd at the French cultural studies page:
<http://frc.sagepub.com/> on SAGE Journals Online: <http://online.sagepub.com/>

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

Coming to Terms with the Future:
The Experience of Modernity in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*

Abstract

This article examines Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* (1993), and its representation of life in the New Towns which emerged on the outskirts of Paris in the post-war period. Revisiting the recent history of urban development around Paris, and in particular the *Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme* drawn up by Paul Delouvrier in 1965, it sets Ernaux's text in the context of other recent portrayals of life in the Parisian suburbs to argue that what seems at first to be a narrative of alienation, as the narrator is confronted by strange and threatening urban worlds, in fact emerges as one of adaptability, as we watch her become absorbed into the systems and networks designed by the planners. The text offers us a portrait of an individual who is not so much modern as modernised, as she gradually becomes accustomed – or more accurately, conditioned – to life in the New Town.

Key words

Ernaux, Delouvrier, Schéma directeur, New Town, banlieue, urban planning, modernity

'La région parisienne, mais c'est le bordel. Il y a ces banlieues inhumaines. Mettez-moi de l'ordre là-dedans' (Maspero, 1990: 196). De Gaulle's famous, though perhaps apocryphal, words to Paul Delouvrier in 1960 triggered one of the most sustained and important bouts of urbanisation and expansion in French history, which would unfold over the next twenty years across the Paris region. Delouvrier's response to de Gaulle's command was the *Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisation de la région de Paris* of 1965, a blueprint for the reorganisation of the Paris region. His initial task was to confront a chronic housing shortage, dealt with mainly through the building of a

series of *grands ensembles*; but the *Schéma directeur* was also a bold attempt to prepare Paris for the year 2000, the ultimate experiment in rational planning. It tried to anticipate the needs of an expanding population, predicted to rise to 14 million by the end of the century, and provide the necessary framework for continued economic expansion. In doing so, it would confirm the capital's place as the economic powerhouse of the country: 'préparer la région de Paris à son avenir [...] c'est faire de cette région un outil économique plus efficace au service de la collectivité nationale' (Delouvrier, 1965: 19). At the heart of the *Schéma directeur* was the creation of eight New Towns in the countryside around Paris, of which five were built, all linked to the capital by a newly implanted system of mass transport, the *Réseau Express Régional* (RER).

Paris had seen similar bouts of upheaval and renewal before of course: just over a hundred years previously, in 1853, Haussmann had begun work on the remodelling of central Paris. Indeed, the parallel between the two projects was quickly recognised, Delouvrier earning the nickname 'l'Haussmann des faubourgs' (Chenu, 1994: 238). Although this has an air of the *boutade* about it, the comparison is an accurate one. Delouvrier's plan is in many ways the precise equivalent in the twentieth century of Haussmann's nineteenth-century redevelopment of the city. Both play a similar role in the history of Paris, and beyond that, of French capitalism.

As the geographer David Harvey points out, urbanisation is the most obvious sign of capitalist industrialisation and expansion. What he calls the 'urbanisation of capital' is the process whereby economic growth is inscribed on the landscape as physical expansion in space (Harvey, 1985: 250-276). Moreover, urbanisation is not just the product of capitalism, but is also essential to capitalism. Capitalism requires urban expansion for its survival: it is dependent on what Henri Lefebvre calls the production

of space. By this, he means the transformation of land into usable (essentially urban) space (Lefebvre, 1974). Like a snake shedding the skin it has outgrown, capitalist activity repeatedly demands newer and bigger environments and settings in order to prosper.

At various points in the history of Paris, the pressures on the system have grown too great, and produced sudden and brutal restructurings of capitalist space, moments of what Harvey terms ‘creative destruction’ (Harvey, 1989: 16). The first of these was Haussmann’s intervention in the wake of the first major crisis of capitalism in 1848. As is now well known, Haussmann set out to improve economic efficiency by engineering the efficient circulation of goods and people. Ensure unhindered movement round the city, ran the argument, and unhindered economic growth should follow. The second moment is Delouvrier’s plan for the development of the Paris region. Not only did Delouvrier’s reorganisation of the Paris region share Haussmann’s economic motivations. Like his predecessor, Delouvrier also recognised that the key to improving efficiency, productivity and growth lay in improving and accelerating circulation, of both goods and people. Hence the reason why the RER rapid transport system forms the backbone of his plan. It is intended to ensure the smooth flow of large quantities of workers around the economic machine, delivering them to and from their places of work, but also allowing them access to designated places of rest, leisure and consumption.

The key difference between the two projects is the scale on which they take place. For since the capitalist economy had itself expanded rapidly in the hundred years which separated them, the geographical area over which that development took place is itself necessarily far greater. Where Haussmann’s efforts were concentrated on reshaping the city itself, Delouvrier’s vision encompassed not just Paris but the

surrounding region. While Haussmann annexed the communes lying beyond the inner ring of *arrondissements* and the *mur des Fermiers-Généraux*, to resituate the boundary of Paris at the foot of the fortifications built by Thiers in the 1840s, Delouvrier turned his attention to the suburbs lying beyond those fortifications (or rather the railway line of the *Petite Ceinture* which had by that time replaced them). Existing urban areas were drawn into a regional development plan, while large tracts of land were appropriated and earmarked for the construction of new satellite towns. The hinterland of the capital was being called upon to play its role in ensuring the growth and development of the French nation (Marchand, 1993: 306-320).

Another striking similarity between the two projects of creative destruction is that their effects are powerful enough to demand expression in literature and art. Both operations provoke writers and artists into trying to articulate the changes to lived experience they bring with them. For just as Baudelaire or the Impressionist painters capture the effects on the individual of demolition, displacement and the laying of the boulevards, so too a number of writers and filmmakers have felt compelled to testify to the effects of the *Schéma directeur*. Indeed, an increasing interest in the legacy of the *Schéma directeur* has been one of the most noticeable trends in French culture of the 1980s and 90s especially. It has been explored most notably in texts by François Maspero (*Les Passagers du Roissy-Express*, 1990) and Annie Ernaux (*Journal du dehors*, 1993), and by Mathieu Kassovitz in his famous film *La Haine* (1995). They all suggest that the implementation of the *Schéma directeur* is a psychological drama as much as a geographical one, as the fracturing and remodelling of space brings with it a similar fracturing and remodelling of those who find themselves caught up in that process.

Kassovitz's film has rapidly become the classic portrait of life in the *banlieue*, establishing – or more accurately, perhaps, confirming – the accepted image of the *banlieue* as sink estate and exclusion zone, and capturing its bizarre relationship with Paris. While perhaps closer to the centre of the city, thanks to the RER, than some parts of the capital itself, the communities of the *banlieue* are separated from it by a gulf in terms of every form of social capital identified by Pierre Bourdieu as central to success in the world – economic, cultural, symbolic.

The themes of dislocation and alienation explored by Kassovitz had already been identified by Maspero six years previously in his journey from North to South through the Parisian suburbs. In Maspero's text, recognition of the alienating and problematic nature of the environments of the *banlieue* is combined with a sense of resistance, expressed both by the author and by the people he meets on his travels – resistance both in terms of a desire to assert the identity of the places which make up the *banlieue*, and a refusal to define them simply in terms of their relationship to Paris, to see them solely in terms as outposts or dormitories for its workers.

Annie Ernaux's text is situated between Maspero's text and Kassovitz's film, not only chronologically but also in terms of the relationship of its protagonist to the suburban world. Unlike Maspero, a resident of the Marais district in central Paris, Ernaux lives in the New Town of Cergy-Pontoise, some twenty kilometres to the west of Paris; unlike the characters in *La Haine*, she is not condemned to do so – she has the capital (economic and cultural) to enable her to live elsewhere. Ernaux's portrait of life in the *banlieue* is more low-key, less dramatic, than that of Kassovitz, but it is no less compelling.

Journal du dehors, in effect, offers us a view from the inside. Covering a period of seven years, from 1985 to 1992, the text is made up of a fragmented series of

observations or snapshots of scenes and episodes from the New Town and the spaces associated with it, such as the RER and the shopping centre. Following its publication in 1993, it was reprinted with a new preface in 1996. Like Baudelaire in *Le Spleen de Paris*, Ernaux sets out to grasp the nature of the absolutely new, to capture what she calls in her preface to the second edition of the text ‘cette modernité dont une ville nouvelle donne le sentiment aigu sans qu’on puisse la définir’ (Ernaux, 1996: 7). In doing so, she is also exploring how that modernity affects those caught up in it. For despite its title, the text is not simply about the ‘dehors’, the external world: Ernaux is careful to point out that it is neither ‘reportage’ nor ‘enquête de sociologie urbaine’ (Ernaux, 1996: 7). Rather, its focus is as much on Ernaux’s response and relationship to the world in which she moves as on the nature of that world itself. It is about coming to terms with a future imagined in the 1960s, and more or less immediately made real; about circulating in the world conceived by Delouvrier and his team of planners, and being forced to adapt to it.

My aim in this article, then, is to explore Ernaux’s representation of the New Town, and through that, the condition of modernity. The specificity of Ernaux’s text, I would argue, lies not just in its evocation of the individual’s relationship to modern urban environments, but also in its exploration of the ways in which those environments affect and shape the individual’s modes of being. More precisely, the text seems to suggest that the remodelling of territory involves the remodelling of those who live in the spaces produced as a result – and this is particularly true when the spaces involved are the radically new worlds of the New Towns. I would argue too that its exploration of the complex relationship between the individual and urban space, and of what David Harvey calls the ‘urbanisation of consciousness’ (Harvey, 1985), sets it apart from, and

problematises, the more straightforward view of the *banlieue* offered by its contemporaries.

Ernaux's journal throws us into the strange world of the New Town from the outset: the very first entry concludes with a striking, almost apocalyptic vision of vast building sites, and electricity pylons criss-crossing the horizon. Having done her shopping in the hypermarket, 'j'ai pris la voie qui longe la tranchée ouverte pour la prolongation du RER J'avais l'impression de monter vers le soleil qui se couchait entre les barres entrecroisées des pylônes dévalant vers le centre de la Ville Nouvelle' (Ernaux, 1996: 12). Our attention is drawn immediately to the essentially man-made world in which Ernaux moves, and which we will not see her leave. As she drives home, her field of vision is framed by the evidence of man's efforts to impose his will on the world around him. Indeed, the way in which the sun is seemingly caged by the pylons serves as an appropriate metaphor for that effort. Moreover, the accumulation of conflicting verbs of motion and direction as she describes the scene (Ernaux rising up to meet a sun which is setting between pylons seeming to cascade down into the centre of the town) serves to produce in the reader a sense of bewilderment and spatial disorientation similar to that felt by the narrator.

This initial glimpse of Cergy leaves us with a fundamental sense of the New Town as an otherworldly place. Ernaux's vision of cascading pylons captures something of the monumental nature of the world produced by the *Schéma directeur*, one which is unlike anything seen before. The landscape of the *banlieue* is dotted with imposing and mysterious buildings: 'en voiture, près de Saint-Denis, la tour Pleyel. Impossible de savoir si elle est habitée par des gens, ou constituée de bureaux' (Ernaux, 1996: 47). The New Town itself confronts her with an array of towers, offices and windswept esplanades, 'constructions éparpillés sur un territoire immense' (Ernaux, 1996: 47). Its

distinctiveness finds expression both in the scale on which it is built, and in unusual spatial configurations and materials, ‘les esplanades ventées, les façades de béton rose ou bleu, le désert des rues pavillonnaires’ (Ernaux, 1996: 47). A combination of gigantic scale, new materials, and strange spaces makes the New Town a more immediately foreign place than the Paris of Haussmann which, while conceived on a scale far grander than anything seen before, was so using recognisable and familiar materials such as stone. Moreover, our sense of this strangeness is further reinforced by Ernaux’s constant reference to the town not as Cergy-Pontoise, but as ‘la Ville Nouvelle’. Designating the town in this way serves firstly to underline the fact that it is an impersonal, anonymous place – one, as she puts it, ‘privé de toute mémoire’ (Ernaux, 1996: 8). The meanings and connotations which a place name collects over time, ‘les marques du passé et de l’histoire’ (Ernaux, 1996: 8), have simply not had time to accumulate. Secondly, her capitalisation of the term lends its referent a daunting air of grandeur and agency.

In the world of the New Town, then, it seems that the modern is not just the new, but the completely alien. Moreover, Ernaux’s text makes clear that it is a world which is correspondingly alienating, producing complex and problematic effects on those who inhabit it. In the preface, Ernaux highlights the psychological impact on her of her arrival in Cergy. She finds moving to the New Town quite literally a shock to the system. It plunges her into what she terms ‘un sentiment d’étrangeté’, a sort of ‘schizophrénie’ which leaves her with ‘l’impression continuelle de flotter entre ciel et terre, dans un *no man’s land*’ (Ernaux, 1996: 7). She is alienated in the literal sense of being made a stranger to herself, left dazed and isolated from her fellow residents as she attempts to come to terms with the world around her: ‘mon regard était semblable aux parois de verre des immeubles de bureaux, ne reflétant personne, que les tours et les

nuages' (Ernaux, 1996: 7). The new world has an affective power on Ernaux, triggering in her a sense of malaise or unease. Driving past the Tour Pleyel, she notes that 'de loin, elle est vide, noire, *malfaisante*' (Ernaux, 1996: 47, my emphasis). The New Town often appears a sinister or even actively hostile force which seems to conspire against its inhabitants: walking through an underground car park, she notices the extractor fans which would mask the cries of a rape victim (Ernaux, 1996: 29). Noticeable here too, of course, is the assumption that rape is a possibility, that the threatening environment of the New Town will almost inevitably be populated by threatening individuals.

Furthermore, Ernaux suggests that the power of the New Town lies not simply in the (often negative) emotional and affective impact it has, but also in its direct influence on the way in which people live their lives. The text offers an insight into how space shapes and encourages particular practices and modes of being, and reveals how the modernised environment of the New Town produces new ways and patterns of living. Ernaux shows herself adept at what Henri Lefebvre calls 'rythmanalyse', the analysis of the rhythms of daily life (Lefebvre and Régulier, 1985: 191-199). She brings out the rhythms which structure existence in the New Town, from the basic and fundamental pattern of daily commuting to the more instinctive, internalised rhythms which dictate the flow of shoppers in the shopping centre. Another early entry describes the crowds circulating in Cergy's shopping centre, and picks out the way in which people are able to adapt themselves to moving in close proximity to others: 'on réussit à éviter, sans les regarder, tous ces corps voisins de quelques centimètres'. Only the young have yet to master the necessary pace: 'on n'est cogné dans le ventre ou le dos que par les caddies et les enfants. "Regarde où tu marches!" s'exclame une mère à son petit garçon' (Ernaux, 1996: 14). Some of these new behaviours are often disconcerting or strange. Taking the RER from Cergy into central Paris for the first time, Ernaux

notices that women getting off the train at 8 o'clock in the morning think nothing of shopping for jewellery on the platform (Ernaux, 1996: 76).

Our sense of the modernised lives led by the inhabitants of the New Town comes also from the occasional glimpses we catch of an older world, the world which existed before the New Town was created *ex nihilo*. Like many of the New Towns in France, Cergy was grafted on to an existing settlement, the small village of Pontoise. While the aim of this may have been to provide the New Town with an anchor in the environment, a source of existing communal energy on which to draw, the consequence is rather more the brutal juxtaposition of two radically different ways of life.

At various points, Ernaux depicts scenes from the traditional butcher's shop she goes to in the village, which, like a relic from an earlier time, is to be found hidden away on the edge of the New Town, submerged beneath its tower blocks and shopping centres (Ernaux, 1996: 41). Returning to the butcher's shop means returning to the world which existed before the New Town, and the condition of modernity of which it is the expression. The local shop is the remnant of a world running at a slower pace, the provincial world in which, as she points out in the preface, Ernaux had always lived, and from which she is wrenched by her move to the New Town.

Her snapshots of the goings-on in the butcher's invite comparison with the world which has erupted on its doorstep. We are made to recognise not just the accelerated nature of life in the New Towns, but also, and more troublingly, the consequences this has for the relationship between self and other. The butcher's shop is an inefficient but congenial place, where gossip is exchanged, and advice sought and given; shoppers seem happy to queue as the butcher serves his clients and advises them on the best or most appropriate cuts of meat (Ernaux, 1996: 42). The supermarket in the *centre commercial*, on the other hand, is efficient and quick, but cold and impersonal,

the checkout girls acknowledging customers with a formulaic and half-hearted welcome. If transactions in the butcher's shop are based on human contact, the owner taking care to greet his regular customers as soon as they enter the shop (Ernaux, 1996: 41), the woman on the checkout who is the point of contact between the supermarket and the client has been reduced to a part in the larger machine, nothing more than 'une main qui ne doit pas se tromper, ni au profit de l'un, ni au profit de l'autre' (Ernaux, 1996: 25).

Overall, the reader's abiding impression of life in the New Town is of disorientation, a disorientation which is generated in particular by the disorientating nature of the New Town's spaces themselves. Its residents have no recognisable points of reference – not just figuratively or historically, in terms of a sense of belonging to a particular place, but also literally. When she first moved to the New Town, Ernaux reflects, 'je me perdais toujours et je continuais de rouler, trop affolée pour m'arrêter. Dans le centre commercial, j'essayais de bien me rappeler par quelle porte j'étais entrée, A, B, C ou D, afin de retrouver la sortie' (Ernaux, 1996: 29).

It seems that the New Town's distinctive power, its power precisely to disturb or alienate those who live there, lies in the way in which it disarms the tools we rely on most to apprehend the world. Firstly, it is a place which adamantly resists comparison or description. Even after twelve years in Cergy, Ernaux says, she still finds it impossible to describe: 'je vis dans la Ville Nouvelle depuis douze ans et je ne sais pas à quoi elle ressemble. Je ne peux pas non plus la décrire, ne sachant pas où elle commence, finit, la parcourant toujours en voiture' (Ernaux, 1996: 64). Secondly, it disrupts narration. Michel de Certeau, in his discussion of everyday life, and the relationship between humans and the places they inhabit, argues that appropriation or ownership of a space, a sense of belonging in a place, comes with the ability to *narrate* it, whether this be

discursively (by describing a route or the layout of a space) or indeed practically (the act of walking, for De Certeau, articulates, produces, or gives sense to a space) (De Certeau, 1990: 148-151).

The New Town is striking above all for the way it challenges such articulation and narration. Like François Maspero as he journeys through the suburbs on the RER, Ernaux foregrounds the fractured nature of space in the New Town. It is made up of discrete areas or zones which, even after many years spent circulating within and between them, she is unable to piece together. She must abandon her attempts to understand how they relate to one another, and acknowledge their discontinuity: ‘je peux seulement noter “je suis allé au centre Leclerc (ou aux Trois-Fontaines, au Franprix des Linades, etc.), j’ai repris l’autoroute, le ciel était violet derrière les tours de Marcouville (ou sur 3M Minnesota)”’ (Ernaux, 1996: 65). Moving through the New Town involves not so much connecting one place with another, as shifting from one point to another; and as Ernaux here makes clear, with her list of different actions and reactions, discontinuous spaces provoke a similar discontinuity in the lives of those who must use them. Everyday life is broken up into discrete blocks of activity – living, shopping, working – between which the individual shuttles in public transport or by car, but hardly ever on foot. Moreover, and importantly, this sense of discontinuity is also reflected in the *form* of the text. For it seems that, just as Baudelaire would turn towards the prose poem in his attempts to express life in a newly modernised Paris, Ernaux too finds that capturing the reality of New Town requires new forms and techniques. The text is composed of a series of incidents or fragments, snapshots of the everyday world she terms *ethnotexte* (Ernaux, 1996: 65). Ernaux makes no attempt to stitch together what she sees into a continuous narrative. Rather, the discontinuity of the text reflects and makes concrete the discontinuity of life in the New Town.

On the basis of this, then, it might seem that *Journal du dehors* is to be read as a portrait of alienation, an account of the dislocation and strangeness produced in the individual by the modern urban world. Doing so also encourages us to see the text itself as a response to the New Town, an act of resistance in the face of the pressures it places on its inhabitants. Indeed, in her preface, Ernaux points out that the episodes or scenes she noted were the ones which provoked in her ‘une émotion, un trouble, ou de la révolte’ (Ernaux, 1996: 8). The expression of her emotional response to, and investment in, the world of the New Town could thus be taken as an act of defiance in the face of a system which seems intent on atomising the individual, and replacing community with anonymity.

Likewise, the reference to revolt implies *Journal du dehors* is to be read as an angry or committed book, Ernaux joining Maspero in casting a critical eye over the *banlieue* and the effects of post-war *aménagement*. Through its critical depiction of the New Town, it perhaps stands as a denunciation of the condition of modernity, and beyond that, a critique of the modern social order which engineers that condition. Pursuing this reading, we might say that the text exposes a system which seems intent on destroying traditional forms of urban life and community – exemplified by the proximity and conviviality of the butcher’s shop, for example – before replacing them with the sort of debased imitation of community on display in some of the public spaces of the redeveloped world, and the métro and RER especially.

Ernaux captures the enforced intimacy of public transport which, while it ensures an acute awareness of the other, also ensures that this awareness takes the form of mute observation or voyeurism. She draws attention to the way in which passengers eavesdrop on or scrutinise each other: ‘une femme, d’un ton ensommeillé, parle à une autre, qui lui fait face. [...] Pendant qu’elle parlait, une autre femme près de la vitre

l'écoutait en la fixant avec curiosité' (Ernaux, 1996: 70-71). Indeed, the text itself, with its portraits of her fellow passengers, is in part a product of the voyeurism which the RER encourages. A sense of isolation or abandonment also surfaces in Ernaux's constant reference to the beggars and homeless people who haunt the metro and the RER. Her focus on these marginal figures is perhaps the clearest example of the text's political edge and her intention to remind us of 'les violences et hontes de la société' (Ernaux, 1996: 9). The irony of their presence in the transport system quickly becomes clear: it is in the very spaces which form the backbone of the modern and efficient world dreamt up by the planners of the *Schéma directeur* where we are confronted everyday with the failure of that system, with the detritus which it produces and fails to absorb.

However, while it might at first appear that we are invited to read the text as an enlightened critique of the New Town and its modernity – and as such, part of that tradition of enlightened and politically engaged criticism exemplified also by Maspero – various details suggest that her relationship to the world she describes is more complex than this. Not the least of these is her statement in the preface that 'j'ai aimé vivre là' (Ernaux, 1996: 8), her recognition that she has in fact come to enjoy life in the New Town. This comment unsettles and inflects our reading of the text in important ways, and does so by making us alert to one aspect of her relationship to the New Town in particular.

Ernaux's initial reaction when faced with the *banlieue* is undoubtedly one of shock. It is clear that she finds the New Town an alien, and alienating, place when she first arrives. At the same time, though, it also becomes clear that this sense of shock or strangeness is not combined with any particular nostalgia for the older world or way of life she has left behind. Indeed, while Ernaux certainly highlights the collision and

contrast between old and new at various points, the effect of this is to throw the old world itself into relief, to make it seem as strange or foreign as the new. A music competition staged in the New Town's cultural centre, for example, takes on an odd, dream-like quality: 'c'était comme un rêve ancien au cœur de la Ville Nouvelle, avec les gestes et la cérémonie des salons d'autrefois' (Ernaux, 1996: 26). We are made to realise the extent to which what appears to be more a natural, more authentic way of life is in fact codified and ritualised in complex ways – ways which can make it potentially as alienating as the world of the New Town. If the young or single prefer the supermarket to the butcher's shop, for instance, it is because of the simplicity it offers, the painlessness of the transactions which go on there. For all its conviviality, on the other hand, the butcher's shop emerges as a place of high ritual, where one is exposed to judgement and potential humiliation at the hands of one's peers. The banter between the butcher and his regular clients articulates mutual recognition of their social status, a satisfied and secure place within the social order. Buying two slices of ham or a portion of minced steak becomes a sign of social failure, a clear indication that there is no family to feed or provide for: 'conscience de démeriter d'un certain ordre social et commerçant en répondant à la question du boucher "et avec ça?": "c'est tout"' (Ernaux, 1996: 43). The New Town, and the rhythms of life it encourages, begin to make the vestiges of the old world, and the desire to cling to them, appear alien, outmoded and unreal.

How, then, are we to explain not just her indifference to the old world, but also the shift in her relationship with the New Town from alienation to acceptance? The answer is to be found not so much in the text itself, as in its prehistory, the story of its origins, which we can reconstruct from her preface to the second edition. The preface was written in 1996 – that is to say, she tells us, some twenty years after she first moved

to the New Town. In other words, when she started writing the diary itself, she had already lived in the New Town for nine years. What also becomes clear from the preface is that her decision to begin writing the diary in 1985 is not an arbitrary one. Rather, the nine-year gap between moving to the New Town and writing about it is the time she takes to recover from the disarray into which she was plunged when she first arrived: 'je suis sortie peu à peu de cette schizophrénie', she says (Ernaux, 1996: 7). She gradually begins to find her feet, and engage with the world in which she finds herself: 'j'ai regardé à quoi jouaient les enfants au pied des immeubles, [...] j'ai prêté attention aux propos qui s'échangeaient dans le RER' (Ernaux, 1996: 8). In other words, the text is not so much the story of her evolution, as the sign that she has finally digested the shock of the new. Rather than a critique of modernity, it is the diary of someone who has begun to come to terms with it, who has adapted to New Town, and accepted the way in which life is led there. Ernaux comes to appreciate its lack of history, its anonymity, and the way in which it throws lives together: 'j'ai aimé vivre là, dans un endroit cosmopolite, au milieu d'existences commencées ailleurs, dans une province française, au Viêt-nam, au Maghreb ou en Côte-d'Ivoire' (Ernaux, 1996: 8).

However, what is also clear is that if she comes to terms with the modernity of the New Town, she does so very much on its own terms. It seems that the narrator who observes the arcane goings-on in the butcher's shop does so with eyes which have gradually been moulded by the New Town. If Ernaux offers us a view from the inside, it is the view of someone who has become part of the system put in place by the post-war planners, and who, moreover, shows herself to be complicit with that system. It is not insignificant that the first year's diary entries are made up entirely of scenes from the RER or the shopping centre in Cergy – that is to say, the two places where the planners of the New Town hoped and expected she would spend most of her time, either

commuting or consuming. At the same time, though, and disconcertingly, Ernaux shows herself to be entirely aware of her complicity. She may well draw attention to the beggars who populate the métro, and suggest that they are the shame of society, but like the majority of her fellow commuters, she also ignores them, or steps round them: ‘je suis passée très au large de lui, comme ceux qui ne lui donnent rien’ (Ernaux, 1996: 21).

Ernaux’s acceptance of the system is what distinguishes her text from Maspero’s account of the *banlieue*. His reading of the *banlieue* is in many ways a reading against the grain. If Ernaux comes to accept, even appreciate, the erasure of the past and the denial of history represented by the New Town, Maspero’s goal is precisely to search it out. His aim in exploring each of the places on the RER into Paris is to remind us of their distinctiveness and history, and in doing so, to contest a project which set out to subordinate them to the capital and absorb them into an amorphous Greater Paris region. In other words, while both may travel through the area at the same time, their relationship to it is radically different. This difference is born not simply of the gap which separates Parisian and *banlieusard*, resident and tourist. Rather, it emerges from each individual’s relationship to the world as a whole, their attitude to the past and the future.

In *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux offers us the portrait of an individual who is not just modern, but modernised, someone who has gradually become accustomed – or more accurately, conditioned – to life in the New Town, and has slowly adapted herself to its rhythms and ways. It is a disarming portrait for the way in which it resists the dominant vision of the *banlieue* as essentially other, alien and alienating. Yet neither is it a naïve celebration of life in the New Town. It stands simply as an evocation of the modern urban condition, and beyond that, of the essential adaptability of the human animal to its environment. The penultimate entry of the journal makes clear, as Ernaux

tells of her pleasure at seeing the suburbs of Paris laid out before her when she returns to the city on the motorway (Ernaux, 1996: 105-106), that the eyes which have had to adjust to the radically new world around them are eyes for whom the sight of the *banlieue* is a welcome one, a sign that home has been reached.

Word count: 5684

References

- Chenu, R. (1994) *Paul Delouvrier, ou la passion d'agir*. Paris: Seuil.
- De Certeau, M. (1990) *L'invention du quotidien, I: arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Delouvrier, P. (1965) *Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région de Paris*. Paris: Ateliers Lacer.
- Ernaux, A. (1996) *Journal du dehors*. Paris: Gallimard, 2nd edition.
- Harvey, D. (1985) *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974) *La Production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos.
- Lefebvre, H. and Régulier, C. (1985) 'Le projet rythanalytique', *Communications* (41): 191-199.
- Marchard, B. *Paris: histoire d'une ville*. Paris: Seuil.
- Maspero, F. (1990) *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express*. Paris: Seuil.